

The Best Bookshops in Beirut, Lebanon

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Alex Rowell takes us on a tour of the best bookshops in Beirut, Lebanon. If there's a bookshop that you think other students and academics should visit when they're undertaking research or visiting a city for a conference, further information about contributing follows this article.



Image Credit: Eternal Sabah Mural by Yazan Halwani on Assaf Building, Hamra Street, Beirut (Magicman678, CC 3.0)

Beirut, whose inhabitants sometimes claim to be the heirs of the ancient Phoenicians who developed the first alphabet in history, holds a place in Middle Eastern letters only conceivably challenged by Cairo and Baghdad in their (sadly now eclipsed) primes. At ground zero of the nineteenth-century *nahda*, or cultural renaissance, Beirut's litterateurs equipped the post-medieval Arab world with the newspapers, dictionaries, translations, typewriter fonts and modernised grammar and vocabulary that would revolutionise literacy from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic, and birthed such innovations as the language's first novels and plays. Owing to a cosmopolitan attitude and a state too weak to censor, even during its civil war (1975-90), Beirut was a magnet for the region's belletrists and a haven for dissidents on the run, with everyone from the Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani and philosopher Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, the Palestinian giants Ghassan Kanafani and Mahmoud Darwish to the Saudi novelist Abd al-Rahman Munif making the city their home at one point or another. That some, like Kanafani, also met violent deaths here is also tragically characteristic – the long list of intellectuals and journalists sent to early graves by Beirut's merciless politics extends into the twenty-first century. The city's leading novelists today – Elias Khoury, Hanan al-Shaykh, Amin Maalouf – are household names internationally.

In few places is this history more palpable than **Bisan** bookstore, on the curiously-named Mahatma Gandhi St that runs downhill from the iconic Hamra St to the stone walls of the American University of Beirut campus. Stepping inside, the Arabic-only shop feels as though it were frozen in time the year its owner, Isa Ahwash, opened it (1985). Turkish coffee, tobacco and mountains of paper perfume the air. Endless reams of poetry anthologies, political polemics, novels, academic studies and plays spill off the shelves, any and all conceivably available floor space

used to stack columns of volumes teetering from the bare ground until they touch the ceiling.

Ahwash is deep in conversation with a middle-aged Syrian couple when I walk in on a Saturday afternoon, the trademark coffee pot by his desk being put, as ever, to prodigious use. When at length the discussion wraps up, and the couple have thanked him for their books and made him promise to visit them in Damascus, he turns to fix me with his intense but warm stare. His hair has begun to gray, but his mind could not be sharper. I ask if he can recommend a *sharh*, or commentary, on the classic pre-Islamic mu`allaqat odes, and without a split-second's pause he calls out to a colleague, 'Get him al-Zawzani's.' There are several such commentaries on the shelf to which he's gestured, but evidently that of the eleventh-century Al-Husain bin Ahmad al-Zawzani is the only one Ahwash will abide. I buy it, along with a collection of Darwish poems (*Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?*).



Photograph courtesy of Mia Azar.

'Certainly,' Ahwash replies, when I ask if the Palestinian poet laureate ever visited the bookstore. 'He lived just around the corner in the '80s,' he says, naming the apartment block and describing how to find it (which I *did* straight after leaving the shop). He ticks off his fingers all the other scribblers who would come round the premises for coffee, cigarettes and conversation – Edward Said, the poets Adonis and Joseph Harb, the historian Kamal Salibi and essentially everyone else cutting a figure in Levantine letters at the time.

'I'm lucky,' Ahwash admits. 'Whatever field my children work in today, they'll never get to know that calibre of people.'

Back uphill on the cobbled tiles of Hamra St, sunk half into the pavement, sits **Librairie Orientale**, a tri-lingual (Arabic, French and English) outlet with a particularly strong offering of non-fiction works. Here one comes to find that definitive history of the Abbasid caliphate written some time in the late 1960s, or that little-known account of the First Intifada that nowhere else stocks. Despite being one of a three-shop chain, the modest-sized Hamra branch retains the intimate feel of an independent. The owner, Maroun Nehme, inherited the business from his father, Bechara, who opened the first shop in 1946 in the central Place de l'Étoile, before the civil war's deadly demarcation line tore the city into two halves just metres from his doors.

Another casualty of that partition that has since reclaimed its place in the post-war downtown area is **Librairie Antoine**. Older than the Lebanese Republic itself, its first shop was opened by Antoine Naufal in 1933 opposite the famous Grand Theatre, and had three branches in the city centre by the time the militiamen arrived to torch and loot them in 1975. Surviving the war and the following two decades of (relative) peace in other neighbourhoods, Librairie Antoine at last made its triumphant return downtown in 2012, with the opening of a three-storey mega-outlet. Purists will scoff that the setting, in the middle of the sleek, Dubai-style 'Beirut Souks' mall complex, lacks the character and authenticity of Hamra St (where Antoine has also had a presence since 1971). They're right, but the fact is that the



Photography courtesy of Mia Azar.

mammoth emporium simply cannot be matched for sheer quantity and breadth.

While French is the house forte, Antoine also stocks a dependable range in English and Arabic, as well as a smaller selection of Spanish, Italian and German volumes. Elsewhere, children's books, magazines, coffee-table productions and stationery may also be found among its three floors. It even boasts its own café, with leather armchairs for the moments the calves and ankles can take standing no more.

Beirut is fortunate – perhaps uniquely so – in being home to the likes of Antoine and Bisan at one and the same time. Reflecting on the first decade after the war, the late Samir Kassir lamented in 2003 that: 'The nascent city has not succeeded in making itself the Renaissance city it once was.' As though to confirm the insight, two years later he would be assassinated by a car bomb outside his Beirut home. Yet, taken in sum, these three bookshops are not only a monument to the city's brilliant but agonised past – they hint, too, at the nascent promise of its future.

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Note: This bookshop guide gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics. Thank you to Mia Azar for providing the images for this guide.

Do you have a favourite bookshop? If there's a bookshop that you think other students and academics should visit when they're undertaking research or visiting a city for a conference, then this is your chance to tell us all about it.

As part of a [regular feature](#) on *LSE Review of Books*, we're asking academics and students to recommend their favourite two or three bookshops in a particular city, with the aim of building an exciting online series for our book-loving community of readers the world over.

Bookshops could be academic, alternative, foreign language, hobby-based, secret or underground institutions, secondhand outlets or connected to a university. We'd like to cover all world regions too.

If something comes to mind, we're looking for around 150 words per bookshop, detailing why each place is a must-see. Our editorial team can then find suitable photos and links to accompany the piece, though you're welcome to supply these too. We only ask that you focus on just one city or region, and two or three bookshops within it.

Email us now if you'd like to contribute: lsereviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk

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